

## **Pluralism and Four Grades of Postmodern Involvement**

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### **Introduction**

These are tolerant, pluralistic times, or so we are often told. They are also postmodern times, or so we are just as often told. Is there a conceptual relationship between pluralism and postmodernism? I think that one's answer to this question will depend on what one means by the two terms in question. Clearly, one can be a pluralist and not a postmodernist, but given a fairly widely accepted understanding of postmodernism, it is far from clear that the converse is true. And even if a specific form of postmodernism does not entail a relevant version of pluralism, it still may be the case that the former provides a plausibility structure for making the latter go down more easily. It would seem fruitful, then, to explore the relationship between different versions of postmodernism and pluralism to see what can be learned. This is what I propose to do in this article. From time to time, I shall also offer a critique of the version of postmodernism in focus.

In what follows, I shall distinguish four grades of postmodern involvement from most to less extreme. In order, those grades are *ontic*, *alethic*, *epistemic*, and *axiological/religious* (a.k.a. *non-empirical postmodernism*). In speaking of "grades of postmodernism involvement" I am referring to what we might call "degrees of ingression." What I have in mind is this. The more deeply ingressed or strongly graded one's postmodernism is, the more pervasive is the impact of postmodern ideas throughout one's worldview. More specifically, with rare exceptions, ontic postmodernism entails the other three (if one is an ontic postmodernist, then if one is consistent, one will also be a postmodernist of the other sorts); alethic postmodernism entails epistemic and axiological/religious postmodernism; epistemic postmodernism entails axiological/religious postmodernism.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is possible to deny the existence or relevance of truth and still affirm the objectivity of rationality if that objectivity is cashed out in an anti-realist way. So, for example, one could hold that, for some person S, belief P is more rational to hold than

## **Ontic Postmodernism**

Ontic postmodernism denies the existence of a mind/theory/language independent world. For the ontic postmodernism, there is no such thing as an objective reality. On the face of it, this claim is pretty hard to take seriously. So before teasing out the implications of ontic postmodernism, we had better try to understand how someone could believe, or at least claim to believe, that there is no such thing as objective reality.

A fairly standard line of argument for this claim goes as follows: First, one refuses to talk about reality itself, and instead, talks about reality assertions, i.e. existence claims, reality talk.

Second, one observes that existence claims are made relative to a background theory or linguistic community. “There are electrons” is made in the context of a broader theory of atoms, protons, and so forth, such that the assertion itself is given meaning by the role it plays in atomic theory. For example, an electron is something with negative charge, that attracts protons, circles the nucleus, and so forth. “Jesus is the Son of God” is similarly an assertion made relative to the Christian story.

Third, rival theories, different narratives, alternative communities have incommensurable stories, accounts that have no common ground that is theory independent and on the basis of which those rivals could, in principle, be compared. Theories/narratives and their kin are imperialistic; they leave no prisoners. Everything whatsoever is theory independent. It follows from this that existence claims are simply assertions that play certain roles relative to different narratives. There are no metanarratives, stories that exhibit an objective reality that is just there, existing for everyone. Advocates of different conceptual schemes literally live in different worlds because there is no such thing as reality itself.

If one asks whether there is something that is REALLY real outside a community’s narrative, then the ontic postmodernist will respond by saying that the questioner is using “REALLY” in an abandoned modernist way and the question should be disallowed as inappropriate, given the postmodern viewpoint. If one does not believe in a narrative independent reality, then the notions of objective truth, objective rationality (understood in a realist way; see below), and objective axiology will, like “Western Civ,” have to go. There is a plurality of worlds, truths, rationalities, and values each constituted by and relative to

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belief Q just in case holding P solves more intellectual problems than holding Q, where a solved problem is not taken as an indication of truth and where it is taken to be an objective fact of the matter as to whether P solves more problems than Q. It would take us to far a field to examine these matters further and, in any case, a realist view of rationality is more relevant to the dialectic in focus.

a different community and its narrative. It should be clear that this form of postmodernism entails a radical version of religious pluralism. Whether God exists and what God is like is literally reduced to linguistic practices relative to different communities. God exists relative to the Christian community because that community uses existence language to talk about God. God does not exist in the atheist community because that community uses existential denial-talk as a form of life.

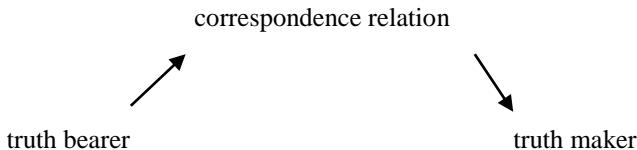
My main purpose is to clarify and not critique ontic postmodernism, but before we turn to the next grade of postmodern involvement, I should at least sketch out a line of response. First, it is self-evident that a language independent reality exists—we are in direct contact with it all the time; we bump up against it when our beliefs are false, we regularly experience acts of comparing our words, concepts, and theories with the real world and adjust the former thereby—and indeed, we have more justification for believing in reality than we do for accepting any of the arguments for ontic postmodernism. This justification places a severe burden of proof on the postmodernist that she/he systematically fails to meet. Second, any attempted support for ontic postmodernism will be either self-refuting or something that should be ignored. If the attempted support (e.g. “linguistic studies demonstrate that various communities carve up ‘reality’ differently, and thus, there is no such thing as objective reality”) is taken to be grounded in reality, then it is self-refuting (the studies must be of real communities and their actual linguistic practices if they provide a “demonstration”). If the alleged support is not even claimed to be rooted in reality, then why should anyone listen to it? It should be dismissed as neurotic rantings. If the postmodernist responds that my dismissal presupposes an outmoded modernist notion of REALITY, then I will just repeat the dilemma for this claim (either it is about reality and is self-refuting or else it is neurotic ranting).

### Alethic Postmodernism

The second and weaker grade of postmodern involvement is alethic postmodernism, which denies the concept of truth, especially the correspondence theory of truth, but accepts the existence of a theory independent world “out there.” Accordingly, our descriptions of that world are neither true nor approximately true. Moreover, we are trapped behind our language (theories, conceptual schemes, narratives) and cannot get to the thing-in-itself; so for all purposes, questions about the existence and nature of the “real world” are moot.

A bit more needs to be said about the correspondence theory of truth. In its simplest form, the correspondence theory says that a proposition is true just in case it corresponds to reality, when what it asserts to be the

case is the case. More generally, truth obtains when a truth bearer stands in an appropriate correspondence relation to a truth maker:



First, what is the truth bearer? The thing that is either true or false is not a sentence, but a proposition. A proposition is the content of a sentence. For example, “It is raining” and “Es regnet” are two different sentences that express the same proposition. A sentence is a linguistic object consisting in a sense perceptible string of markings formed according to a culturally arbitrary set of syntactical rules, a grammatically well-formed string of spoken or written scratchings/sounds. Sentences are true just in case they express a true proposition or content.

What about truth makers? What is it that makes a proposition true? The best answer is facts. A fact is some real state of affairs in the world, for example, grass is green, an electron has a negative charge, God is all-loving. Consider the proposition that *grass is green*. This proposition is true just in case a specific fact, *viz.* grass’s being green, actually obtains in the real world. If Sally has the thought that grass is green, the specific state of affairs, (grass actually being green) “makes” the prepositional content of her thought true just in case the state of affairs actually is the way the proposition represents it to be. Grass’s being green makes Sally’s thought true even if Sally is blind and cannot tell whether or not it is true, and even if Sally does not believe the thought. Reality makes thoughts true or false. A thought is not made true by someone believing it or by someone being able to determine whether or not it is true. Put differently, evidence allows one to tell whether or not a thought is true, but the relevant fact is what makes it true.

Our study of truth bearers has already taken us into the topic of the correspondence relation. Correspondence is a two-placed relation between a proposition and a relevant fact. A two-placed relation, such as “larger than,” is one that requires two things (say, a desk and a book) before it holds. Similarly, the truth relation of correspondence holds between two things—a relevant fact and a proposition—just in case the fact matches, conforms to, and corresponds with the proposition.

What reasons can be given for accepting the correspondence theory of truth? Two main arguments have been advanced for the correspondence theory, one descriptive and one dialectical. The descriptive argument focuses on a careful description and presentation of specific cases to see

what can be learned from them about truth. As an example, consider the case of Joe and Frank. While in his office, Joe receives a call from the university bookstore that a specific book he had ordered—Richard Swinburne’s *The Evolution of the Soul*—has arrived and is waiting for him. At this point, a new mental state occurs in Joe’s mind—the thought that Swinburne’s *The Evolution of the Soul* is in the bookstore.

Now Joe, being aware of the content of the thought, becomes aware of two things closely related to it: the nature of the thought’s intentional object (Swinburne’s book being in the bookstore) and certain verification steps that would help him to determine the truth of the thought. For example, he knows that it would be irrelevant for verifying the thought to go swimming in the Pacific Ocean. Rather, he knows that he must take a series of steps that will bring him to a specific building and look in certain places for Swinburne’s book in the university bookstore.

So Joe starts out for the bookstore, all the while being guided by the proposition: “Swinburne’s *The Evolution of the Soul* is in the bookstore.” Along the way, his friend Frank joins him, though Joe does not tell Frank where he is going or why. They arrive at the store and both see Swinburne’s book there. At that moment, Joe and Frank simultaneously have a certain sensory experience of seeing Swinburne’s book, *The Evolution of the Soul*. But Joe has a second experience not possessed by Frank. Joe experiences that his thought matches and corresponds with an actual state of affairs. He is able to compare his thought with its intentional object and “see,” be directly aware, that the thought is true. In this case, Joe actually experiences the correspondence relation itself and truth itself becomes an object of his awareness.

The dialectical argument asserts that those who advance alternative theories of truth or who simply reject the correspondence theory actually presuppose it in their own assertions, especially when they present arguments for their views or defend them against defeaters. Sometimes this argument is stated in the form of a dilemma: Those who reject the correspondence theory either take their own utterances to be true in the correspondence sense or they do not. If the former, then those utterances are self-defeating. If the latter, there is no reason to accept them because one cannot take their utterances to be true.

Alethic postmodernists deny the existence of objective truth, construed along the lines of the correspondence theory, which they often equate with absolute truth. According to Brian McLaren, making absolute truth claims becomes problematic in the postmodern context. Says McLaren, “I think that most Christians grossly misunderstand the philosophical baggage associated with terms like *absolute* or *objective* (linked to foundationalism and the myth of neutrality). . . . Similarly,

arguments that pit absolutism versus relativism, and objectivism versus subjectivism, prove meaningless or absurd to postmodern people . . .”<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, this postmodernist rejection of objective or absolute truth rests on at least two confusions. The first postmodern confusion involves metaphysical vs. epistemic notions of absolute truth. In the metaphysical and correct sense, absolute truth is the same thing as objective truth. On this view, people discover truth, they do not create it, and a claim is made true or false in some way or another by reality itself, totally independently of whether the claim is accepted by anyone. Moreover, an absolute truth conforms to the three fundamental laws of logic, which are themselves absolute truths. According to objectivism, a commitment to the absolute truth of some proposition P entails no thesis about a knowing subject’s epistemic situation regarding P.

By contrast with the metaphysical notion, postmodernists claim that a commitment to absolute truth is rooted in Cartesian anxiety and its need for absolute certainty, and accordingly claim that acceptance of the absolute truth of P entails acceptance of the conjunction of P’s truth in the objective sense and the possibility of a (finite) knowing subject having Cartesian certainty with respect to P. Thus, one postmodernist recently opined that commitment to objective truth and the correspondence theory is merely “. . . an epistemic project [that] is funded by ‘Cartesian anxiety,’ a product of methodological doubt . . .”<sup>3</sup>

As I have already pointed out, this claim is entirely false philosophically. Advocates of a correspondence theory of objective truth take the view to be a realist metaphysical thesis and they steadfastly reject all attempts to epistemologize the view. Moreover, historically, it is incredible to assert that the great Western thinkers from Aristotle up to Descartes—correspondence advocates all—had any concern whatever about truth and Cartesian anxiety. The great correspondence advocate Aristotle was hardly in a Cartesian quandary when he wisely pointed out that in the search for truth, one ought not expect a greater degree of epistemic strength than is appropriate to the subject matter, a degree of strength that varies from topic to topic. The correspondence theory was not born when Descartes came out of his stove, and postmodernists lose credibility when they pretend otherwise. The claim that some proposition P is an objective or absolute truth is simply the claim that P corresponds to reality. Such a claim says absolutely nothing about the speaker’s degree of certainty with respect to P.

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<sup>2</sup> Brian McLaren, “Emergent Evangelism,” *Christianity Today* (November 2004): 42-43.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Kennison, “There’s No Such Thing As Objective Truth, and It’s a Good Thing, Too,” in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. by Timothy Philips, Dennis Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 157.

The second confusion plaguing alethic postmodernists is one about the identity of the truth bearer. As we have already seen, the informed correspondence theorist will say that propositions are truth bearers. What is a proposition? Minimally, it is the content of declarative sentences/statements and thoughts/beliefs that is true or false. Beyond that philosophers are in disagreement, but most would agree that a proposition (1) is not located in space or time; (2) is not identical to the linguistic entities that may be used to express it; (3) is not sense perceptible; (4) is such that the same proposition may be in more than one mind at once; (5) need not be grasped by any (at least finite) person to exist and be what it is; (6) may itself be an object of thought when, for example, one is thinking about the content of one's own thought processes; (7) is in no sense a physical entity.

By contrast a sentence is a linguistic type or token consisting in a sense perceptible string of markings formed according to a culturally arbitrary set of syntactical rules. A statement is a sequence of sounds or body movements employed by a speaker to assert a sentence on a specific occasion. So understood, neither sentences nor statements are good candidates for the basic truth bearer.

It is pretty easy to show that having or using a sentence (or any other piece of language) is neither necessary nor sufficient for thinking or having propositional content. First, it is not necessary. Children think prior to their acquisition of language—how else could they thoughtfully learn language?—and indeed, we all think without language regularly. Moreover, the same propositional content may be expressed by a potentially infinite number of pieces of language, and thus that content is not identical to any linguistic entity. This alone does not show that language is not necessary for having propositional content. But when one attends to the content that is being held constant as arbitrary linguistic expressions are selected to express it, that content may easily be seen to satisfy the non-linguistic traits of a proposition listed above.

Second, it is not sufficient. If erosion carved an authorless linguistic scribble in a hillside, for example, “I’m eroding,” then strictly speaking it would have no meaning or content, though it would be empirically equivalent to another token of this type that would express a proposition were it the result of authorial intention.

Postmodernists attack a straw man when they focus on the alleged inadequacies of linguistic objects to do the work required of them in a correspondence theory of truth. Speaking for himself and other postmodernists, Joseph Natoli claims that “No one representation, or narrative, can reliably represent the world because language/pictures/sounds (signifiers) are not permanent labels attached to the things of the

world nor do the things of the world dwell inside such signifiers.”<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, even granting the fact that language (and certain sensations) is problematic if taken to represent things in the world (e.g. that the language/world hookup is arbitrary), it follows that human subjects cannot accurately represent the world only if we grant the further erroneous claim that representational entities are limited to language (and certain sensations). But this is precisely what the sophisticated correspondence theorist denies.

Again, Richard Rorty says, “To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is not truth, that sentences are elements of human language, and that human languages are human creations. Truth cannot be out there—cannot exist independently of the human mind—because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there . . . Only descriptions . . . can be true and false.”<sup>5</sup> It should be obvious that Rorty attacks a straw man and that his argument goes through only if we grant that sentences are the fundamental truth bearers.

### **Epistemic Postmodernism**

Epistemic postmodernists do not target reality or truth; rather, the object of their rejection is reason (allegedly construed along modernist lines) and “objective rationality.” The notion of objective rationality they reject included two components: the ability of a knowing, believing subject to have (1) objective justification for his beliefs and (2) direct, cognitive access to the objects of knowledge in the external world. Let us analyze these components in this order.

Postmodernists reject the notion that rationality is objective on the grounds that no one approaches life in a totally objective way without bias. Thus, objectivity is impossible, and observations, beliefs, and entire narratives are theory-laden. There is no neutral standpoint from which to approach the world. Therefore, observations, beliefs and so forth are perspectival constructions that reflect the viewpoint implicit in one’s own web of beliefs. For example, Stanley Grenz claims that postmodernism rejects the alleged modernist view of reason which “. . . entails a claim to dispassionate knowledge, a person’s ability to view reality not as a conditioned participant but as an unconditioned observer—to peer at the world from a vantage point outside the flux of history.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Joseph P. Natoli, *Primer to Postmodernity* (Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 18.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> Stanley Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 15.

Regarding knowledge, postmodernists believe that there is no point of view from which one can define knowledge itself without begging the question in favor of one's own view. "Knowledge" is a construction of one's social, linguistic structures, not a justified, truthful representation of reality by one's mental states. For example, knowledge amounts to what is deemed to be appropriate according to the professional certification practices of various professional associations. As such, knowledge is a construction that expresses the social, linguistic structures of those associations, nothing more, nothing less.

These postmodernist claims represent some very deep confusions about the notion of objectivity. As a first step towards clearing away this confusion, we need to draw a distinction between psychological and rational objectivity. It is clear from the quote above that Grenz' confused understanding of objectivity is at least partly rooted in his mistaken conflation of these two senses. Psychological objectivity is detachment, the absence of bias, a lack of commitment either way on a topic.

Do people ever have psychological objectivity? Yes, they do, typically, in areas in which they have no interest or about which they know little or nothing. Note carefully two things about psychological objectivity. For one thing, it is not necessarily a virtue. It is if one has not thought deeply about an issue and has no convictions regarding it. But as one develops thoughtful, intelligent convictions about a topic, it would be wrong to remain "unbiased," that is, uncommitted regarding it. Otherwise, what role would study and evidence play in the development of a one's approach to life? Should one remain "unbiased" that cancer is a disease, that rape is wrong, that the New Testament was written in the first century, that there is design in the universe, if one has discovered good reasons for each belief? No, one should not.

For another thing, while it is possible to be psychologically objective in some cases, most people are not psychologically objective regarding the vast majority of the things they believe. In these cases, it is crucial to observe that a lack of psychological objectivity does not matter, nor does it cut one off from knowing or seeing the world directly the way it is, or from presenting and arguing for one's convictions. Why? *Because a lack of psychological objectivity does not imply a lack of rational objectivity and it is the latter than matters most, not the former.*

To understand this, we need to get clear on the notion of rational objectivity. Rational objectivity is the state of having accurate epistemic access to the thing itself. This entails that if one has rational objectivity regarding some topic, then one can discern the difference between genuinely good and bad reasons/evidence for a belief about that topic and one can hold the belief for genuinely good reasons/evidence. The important thing here is that bias does not stand between a knowing

subject and an intentional object nor does it eliminate a person's ability to assess the reasons for something. Bias may make it more difficult, but not impossible. If bias made rational objectivity impossible, then no teacher—including the postmodernist herself—could responsibly teach any view the teacher believed on any subject! Nor could the teacher teach opposing viewpoints, because she would be biased against them!

Grenz exhibits the twin confusions, so common among postmodernists, of failing to assess properly the nature and value of psychological objectivity, and of failing to distinguish and properly assess the relationship between psychological and rational objectivity.

So much for objectivity. The second component of epistemic postmodernism is the denial of direct cognitive access to the objects of consciousness. Postmodernists adopt a highly contentious model of perception and intentionality, often without argument, and they seem to enjoin serious consideration of a *prima facie* more plausible model. The result is that postmodernists are far too pessimistic about the prospects of human epistemic success.

Postmodernists adopt a linguistic version of René Descartes' idea theory of perception (and intentionality generally). To understand the idea theory, and the postmodern adaptation of it, a good place to start is with a common sense, critical realist view of perception. According to critical realism, when a subject is looking at a red object such as an apple, the object itself is the direct object of the sensory state. What one sees directly is the apple itself. True, one must have a sensation of red to apprehend the apple, but on the critical realist view, the sensation of red is to be understood as a case of being-appeared-to-redly and analyzed as a *self-presenting property*. What is a self-presenting property? If some property F is a self-presenting one, then it is by means of F that a relevant external object is presented directly to a person, and F presents itself directly to the person as well. Thus, F presents its object meditately though directly, and itself immediately.

This is not as hard to understand as it first may appear. Sensations, such as being-appeared-to-redly, are an important class of self-presenting properties. If Jones is having a sensation of red while looking at an apple, then having the property of being-appeared-to-redly as part of his consciousness modifies his substantial self. When Jones has this sensation, it is a tool that presents the red apple meditately to him and the sensation also presents itself to Jones. What does it mean to say that the sensation presents the apple to him meditately? Simply this: it is in virtue of or by means of the sensation that Jones directly sees the apple itself.

Moreover, by having the sensation of red, Jones is directly aware both of the apple and his own awareness of the apple. For the critical realist, the sensation of red may indeed be a tool or means that Jones uses to

become aware of the apple, but he is thereby directly aware of the apple. His awareness of the apple is direct in that nothing stands between Jones and the apple, not even his sensation of the apple. That sensation presents the apple directly, though as a tool, Jones must have the sensation as a necessary condition for seeing the apple. On the critical realist view, a knowing subject is not trapped behind or within anything, including a viewpoint, a narrative, or a historical-linguistic perspective. To have an entity in the external world as an object of intentionality is to already be “out there”; there is no need to escape anything. One is not trapped behind one’s eyeballs or anything else. It is a basic fallacy of logic to infer that one sees a point-of-viewed-object from the fact that one sees an object from a point of view.

Before leaving the critical realist view, it is important to say that the theory does not limit self-presenting properties to those associated with the five senses and, therefore, does not limit the objects of direct awareness to ordinary sensory objects. The critical realist will say that a knowing subject is capable of direct acquaintance with a host of non-sense-perceptible objects—one’s own ego and its mental states, various abstract objects like the laws of mathematics or logic, and spirit beings, including God.

By contrast, for Descartes’ idea theory, one’s ideas, in this case, sensations, stand between the subject and the object of perception. Jones is directly aware of his own sensation of the apple and indirectly aware of the apple in the sense that it is what causes the sensation to happen. On the idea theory, a perceiving subject is trapped behind his own sensations and cannot get outside them to the external world in order to compare his sensations to their objects to see if those sensations are accurate.

Now, in a certain sense, postmodernists believe that people are trapped behind something in the attempt to get to the external world. However, for them the wall between people and reality is not composed of sensations as it was for Descartes; rather, it is constituted by one’s community and its linguistic categories and practices. One’s language serves as a sort of distorting and, indeed, creative filter. One cannot get outside one’s language to see if one’s talk about the world is the way the world is. Thus, Grenz advocates a new outlook, allegedly representing some sort of consensus in the human sciences, that expresses “a more profound understanding of epistemology. Recent thinking has helped us see that the process of knowing, and to some extent even the process of experiencing the world, can occur only within a conceptual framework, a framework mediated by the social community in which we participate.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 73-74.

It has been noted repeatedly that such assertions are self-refuting. For if we are all trapped behind a framework such that simple, direct seeing is impossible, then no amount of recent thinking can help us see anything; all it could do would be to invite us to see something *as* such and such from within a conceptual framework. Given the self-refuting nature of such claims, and given the fact that we all experience regularly the activity of comparing our conceptions of an entity with the entity itself as a way of adjusting those conceptions, it is hard to see why anyone, especially a Christian, would adopt the postmodern view. In any case, I have seldom seen the realist perspective seriously considered by postmodern thinkers, and until it is, statements like Grenz' will be taken as mere mantras by many of us.

### **Axiological (religious, non-empirical) Postmodernism**

It is possible, indeed, it is widely believed that the physical world and only the physical world studied by the hard sciences employing empirical means is real, that those sciences and only those sciences furnish truth or approximate truth regarding the domain of entities within their proper domain, and that objective rationality is achieved in and only in those sciences. Underwritten by some form of empiricism, this view eschews postmodernism as an approach to the hard sciences while employing it everywhere else. Technically, this grade of postmodern involvement should be called “non-empirical postmodernism,” but I have adopted the somewhat less accurate label “axiological postmodernism” because of the main impact of this view in contemporary life. Axiological postmodernism treats religious, ethical, political and aesthetic claims in a postmodernist way.

Standing behind axiological postmodernism, at least in popular culture, is an implicit epistemology that we may call *Folk Empiricism*: *For any belief P, P is reasonable to believe and assert if and only if P can be and has been adequately tested with one's five senses*. Let's name this claim FE. The point of FE is to limit what we can reasonably believe and assert to what can be “appropriately” tested with the five senses, and the hard sciences are taken to be the ideal exemplars of this epistemic standpoint. When many people make claims consistent with axiological postmodernism, they are assuming something like FE whether they know it or not. So we need to ask, how do things stand with respect to FE? How should we assess it?

First, in a certain sense, FE is self-refuting. As we shall see shortly, FE is, in fact, false. But it is arguably the case that FE could have been true. It is not necessarily false like “ $2+3=17$ .” Rather, it is like “Cuba is a state in the United States.” While false, under certain circumstances, this sentence would have been true. Similarly, arguably, FE could have

been true even though it is false. By contrast and strictly speaking, self-refuting statements, for example, “No sentence of English is longer than three words” are necessarily false—they could not be true.

It follows then, that, strictly speaking, FE itself is not self-refuting. But that should be of small comfort to people who assume FE. Why? Because all an advocate of FE can do is merely to shout FE and leave it at that. One cannot give any evidence that FE itself is a reasonable belief because this claim about FE’s rationality *would* be self-refuting. It would amount to this assertion: It is reasonable to believe (and, thus, we all ought to believe) that “for any belief P, P is reasonable to believe and assert if and only if P can be and has been appropriately tested with one’s five senses.” Once one claims that FE is itself reasonable to accept, that claim is self-refuting because there is no sense experience to which one can appeal to justify belief in FE.

To clarify, suppose one claimed that there was an apple on the table. It is very clear what sensory experiences could verify or falsify that claim. But no such sensory experiences can be given to justify FE itself. Thus, FE cannot be recommended as something one should reasonably believe, and for those of us who want reasonable beliefs, that is enough for us to dismiss FE from further consideration. And if someone claims that FE is itself reasonable, his or her assertion is self-refuting.

Either adequate reasons can be given for FE or they cannot. If they cannot, then there are not adequate reasons to believe it. If there are, then FE is self-refuting and there are not adequate reasons to believe it. Either way, FE’s adequacy as a viewpoint is in trouble. Not only are there no adequate reasons for believing FE, there *can* be no such reasons! So much for FE as an adequate, reasonable guide for life decisions!

But there is more. Not only can there be no adequate reasons for accepting FE, but FE fails to account for many of the things we actually know or believe on the basis of adequate reasons. Let me give some examples. For brevity, let us use seeing as a shorthand way of speaking about testing something with all five senses and not just sight.

First, truth (correspondence with reality) is not something one can see, so if we are limited to our five senses, no one could have a grasp of truth itself. If I believe that a particular book I ordered is at the bookstore waiting to be picked up, and if I go to the bookstore and see the book, I also know that my thought that the book was there is true. I can see the book, but I cannot see my thought that the book is there nor can I have a sense experience that the situation in the bookstore (my book being there) accurately corresponds with my thought. In a case where my wife tells me I am angry and I am not sure she is correct, I can introspect to decide the matter. If I take the thought “I am angry” and use it to search my inner feelings, then when I experience my own anger, I come to

know that my wife's claim is true. But I cannot see my thought ("I am angry"), I cannot see the emotional state of anger itself, and I cannot see the true correspondence between the thought and my feeling of anger. Truth itself is not sense perceptible.

Second, adequate notions of what knowledge is, what counts as a good explanation, and what makes a piece of evidence a good piece of evidence are not matters one can know or have a reasonable view about if one is limited to one's five senses. Take knowledge. Many have understood knowledge to be justified true belief. If I actually know that I had breakfast this morning, then (1) I believe I had breakfast, (2) it is actually true that I have breakfast, and (3) I must have adequate reasons (perhaps, from memory) that I had breakfast (I cannot just have a lucky guess about breakfast). Some people think that this definition of knowledge is close, but not entirely adequate to capture what knowledge itself is. Now, how in the world are we going to evaluate this definition of knowledge and ones offered by detractors? How are we going to come to know what knowledge itself is, if we are limited to what we can test with the five senses? Exactly to what sensation could a proponent or critic of this definition appeal to make his or her case? These questions make evident (and making something evident is not something we can recognize by our senses!) how absurd FE really is as a guide for knowledge.

We know a host of other things that are not justifiable by our five senses. We do not know our own states of consciousness (our thoughts, feelings, desires, beliefs, whether we chose to do something or did it passively out of habit) and we do not know our own selves by sensation. We do not even know which sensations in a room filled with people are ours as opposed to which belong to others by our five senses! We do not gain normative knowledge by our senses, knowledge of what we should/should not believe (rational normativity), what we should and should not do (moral normativity), or what is beautiful or ugly (aesthetic normativity). And we do have this sort of knowledge. I should rationally believe there are such things as birds or that  $2+2=4$ ; I should morally recognize that kindness and honesty are virtues and not vices; and I should aesthetically recognize that a sunset viewed from Maui over a turquoise ocean is beautiful.

Even some things studied in the hard sciences cannot be known by the five senses. For example, one cannot see, touch, feel, hear, or smell a magnetic field, but we know there are such things. One can see or feel the effects of such a field, say, the iron filings falling into a particular pattern, but one cannot see the field itself. We infer that there must be such a field to explain the effects.

At the end of the day, FE is an inadequate guide for living a rational life, no matter how many people believe it. To the degree that axiological postmodernism is justified by FE, then it must be rejected as well.

### **Conclusion**

In this article I have sought to clarify and distinguish four different forms of postmodernism. I have ranked them in order of their strength, and along the way I have criticized different versions, though I admit that my remarks are brief and need further development. In so doing, I hope I have clarified the relationship between postmodernism and pluralism in their various forms.